

HOME TRENDS

The Kitchen Undergoes A Sea Change As Lifestyles Change

(NAPSA)—Thanks to changing lifestyles, today's kitchen is starting to look, if not exactly like a living room, then at least like a comfortable and stylish gathering space where functionality meets design.

Gone are the days when people only used the room to prepare meals—and that shows in the remodeling choices they're making. According to Dr. JoAnn Emmel and her colleagues at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's Center for Real Life Kitchen Design, who've done extensive research on Americans' cooking habits and the evolution of kitchen design, there are three recurring trends in modern kitchens:

- **Open-plan designs**—With more and varied activities happening at all hours, designers are opening the kitchen up into the dining room or family room by incorporating fewer wall cabinets and walls.

- **Islands**—The island invites family and friends to gather around it while also providing an easily accessible workplace. Think of your last party—chances are guests congregated around the island, chatting and snacking while you prepared dinner.

- **Multiple centers**—Multiple work centers within a kitchen create a need for additional appliances. For instance, separate areas for food preparation might include an oven, a cooktop, a sink and a microwave.

Perhaps nowhere is the marriage between functionality and design more obvious than in appliances. Not only do the latest innovations offer homeowners conve-



The latest appliances mesh functionality and design.

nience and cutting-edge design, but they seem to blend seamlessly into existing decors. One especially popular change: drawer configurations, found in everything from dishwashers to freezers to even microwave ovens, that also allow for below-counter placement for a clean, sophisticated look.

That new configuration alone has produced a sea change in what consumers expect from their microwaves, which are now used in 96 percent of homes. (In fact, a national study conducted by the Center for Real Life Kitchen Design found that 59 percent of respondents reported using their microwave as much as, or more than, their range.)

How big of a sea change? Let's face it, the standard microwave can be a bulky and unsightly addition to a countertop. But as Dr. Emmel notes: "As kitchens open

up with fewer wall cabinets, or transition fluidly into a great room, microwave placement becomes a very important part of planning and designing a new kitchen." And simply positioning it beneath a counter—while a common solution—can render the microwave somewhat inaccessible.

By contrast, the newest microwave drawer configuration provides access from the top at a convenient height for almost any cook in the family, be they adults, children, the elderly or disabled. And it moves the appliance off the counter, thereby freeing up space for other activities such as meal preparation and entertaining.

The researchers at the Center for Real Life Kitchen Design were so impressed by the way the Insight Pro Microwave Drawer oven from Sharp addressed this emerging design concern, with its mix of style, technology and convenience, that they had it installed in their recently renovated gourmet kitchen. And even non-gourmet cooks will like the varied configuration options it boasts, including 30- and 24-inch-width stand-alone units, a 3-in-1 range featuring a Microwave Drawer oven, and a combination ceramic cooktop and drawer.

The effect? Totally cutting edge. And with the kitchen truly becoming the heartbeat of the home, the refreshing way a company like Sharp approaches a mainstay such as the microwave is a huge plus for consumers.

For more information on Sharp's full line of cooking appliances, visit www.sharppusa.com or call 866-RANGE99.